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Binary Weapons Funding Is a Side Issue

By Joseph D. Douglass Jr.

Each year since 1979, the Defense Department has proposed the production of a new binary chemical warfare artillery shell. This would be followed by a binary bomb and then a binary multiple rocket system.

Each year Congress has rejected the proposal. Although the Senate late last night voted for such a program, rejecting 50 to 46 an amendment by David Pryor (D., Ark.) to delete funding for the binary, the weapon still faces an uncertain future in any House showdown. But whether or not Congress kills the binary weapon this year, the real argument against it is not that the U.S. should eschew possession of improved chemical weapons, but that any modernization will focus attention away from troubling Soviet advances in biological and germ warfare. These developing threats make the binary now seem inadequate or, perhaps more to the point, distracting.

The binary munition is one in which two relatively nontoxic chemicals are kept separate in the shell until it is fired or about to be launched. The chemicals are then mixed and become a lethal warfare agent. Because of current arms-control treaties, U.S. stockpiles have not been modernized with the far more lethal chemical toxins now available—even though the Soviets may already be modernizing their arsenal in spite of the treaties.

Problems With the Argument

The Pentagon would like to believe that the new set of binary munitions will deter the Red Army from using chemical weapons in a European conflict. There are two problems with this argument. First, the addition of binary munitions to what is already deployed in Europe is unlikely to have any significant effect on Soviet plans for war in Europe. In such an unlikely event, the state of the U.S. chemical warfare munitions stockpile will be the least of our problems. Second, to the extent the military really wants to be serious about countering the Soviet chemical threat, it will be the first to admit that the binary is inadequate to counter that threat.

Instead, the most significant factor in assessing the Soviet chemical and biological threat is the enormous expansion in the applied biological and chemical sciences—biotechnology and genetic engineering—that emerged in the 1970s. There is ample evidence in Soviet military literature that these techniques are being applied to biological, chemical, toxin and, perhaps most fearsome, gene warfare. And this is precisely what emigre Soviet scientists since 1981 have said might be happening.

This developing threat differs significantly from the 1960s mustard and nerve agent threat that applied when the binary was first developed. Now, a prudent planner needs to account for far more toxic agents designed to penetrate masks and protective garb, rapid-acting incapacitants and devilishly tailored biological agents. This threat is not just directed against military targets, but against civilians as well. The enemy forces of greatest concern are not regular military forces but covert intelligence and special operations forces. The time of greatest concern is before the war starts, on the eve of the war, rather than after it is well under way. And the main objectives or targets of the developing threat seem more likely to be strategic, for example nuclear deterrent forces and high-level command and control, rather than tactical battlefield.

The critical question now is not how best to deter a Soviet 1960s-style chemical strike in Europe, but how the U.S. should respond if a revolutionary Soviet threat emerges.

The first step is to understand much more precisely the nature of the problem. Very little thought has been directed to (1) what an advanced chemical, toxin, biological and gene warfare threat might encompass, (2) how intelligence on Soviet activities in these areas could be greatly improved, and (3) what defensive measures are possible when the entire array of new technologies is applied to the problem. But until such action has been undertaken, it seems that any thoughts on offensive modernization, be they binary, toxins or a gene warfare deterrent, ought to be shelved.

Recognizing that Pentagon and intelligence-community fears are probably well founded, the second step is to identify and undertake actions designed to stop the emergence of these dread new dangers. I propose a plan of action based on the deep and widespread abhorrence of chemical and biological warfare that is shared by people on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Free World scientists, academics, industrialists, journalists and other opinion makers should mount a massive propaganda campaign against Soviet and East European biological and chemical warfare programs, and against the possible spreading of these techniques to Third World dictators and terrorist elements.

The Iron Curtain can be penetrated, and penetrated very effectively—not by governments, but by all those doing business behind it. Every scientist at every international conference can be a strong voice, and the scientists' eyes, ears and minds should be utilized to learn better what the Soviets and their East European allies are doing. Every industry doing business with the Soviet bloc and its intermediaries can decide what not to sell or under what assurances to sell and, if properly alerted to the potential dangers, will have strong reason to exercise those rights. Every national and international organization can solicit the facts from its membership, help reveal what is actually happening, and communicate world opinion to Soviet bloc counterparts.

While the target of these proposed actions would be both the Soviet state and its people, the latter are the primary target. Every Soviet scientist, industrial manager, academic and technician is a potential source of information. In addition, research in biological and gene warfare is highly dependent on the efforts of many individual scientists, many of whom would listen to appeals from the West. It would be easy for some of them to block or impede progress in such Soviet research. The world-wide scientific and technical community has enormous latent powers of persuasion, far more than governments do. A massive effort to mobilize this power should be mounted.

Most, if not all, of these and other possible actions will be stillborn if at the same time the U.S. undertakes binary chemical warfare modernization. If the U.S. modernizes its chemical warfare arsenal now, expressing fear and concern about the moral implications of Soviet research would fall on deaf ears behind the Iron Curtain, or worse, be met with an embarrassing plethora of recriminations.

If, after two or three years, it is clear that Soviet efforts are what we now suspect they might be, the need for a U.S. offensive response should be reevaluated. It will then have become clear that Soviet actions jeopardize vital U.S. national interests, and are sound conditions for withdrawing from the relevant arms-control treaties. But until the gravity of Soviet actions is such that the U.S. should withdraw from the treaties, no offensive modernization program should be undertaken.

Model T in the Indy 500

And by abandoning the relevant arms-control treaties, the U.S. would not be bound by the constraints placed on it by those treaties, and could instead begin a modernization geared to the actual threat. In today's world, it would not make much sense to send a Model T Ford to race in the Indianapolis 500.

But for now an offensive modernization program is premature. Not enough has been done to understand what is happening or, if our fears are justified, to exert pressure, both private and public, to cause the Soviets to veer from their course.

This is where our immediate efforts should be directed—not to initiating a new munitions program that will almost certainly foreclose any possibility of stopping chemical and biological warfare proliferation and the emergence of gene warfare.

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